

The Stained Glass Window

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Section 2: Description

Lily Brannan had settled into her new life in Vermont, living in her house while it was being renovated.

Life was perfect with the exception of having fainted when a stained glass window was found hidden in the wall of her bedroom, and Lily recognized the design. Trying to solve that mystery competed with her need to figure out what to do with the two gorgeous men in her life. What should she do?

Chapter One

The last thing I remembered was seeing the image lit with the sunlight, and feeling the world fade away around me as I slumped down.

Now I realized I was lying on the floor of what would soon be my bedroom, my head on something soft. What the hell had happened?

I looked up quizzically. Tom was kneeling beside me, his eyes unmistakably concerned. I tried to sit up, but he kept a firm hand on my shoulder. “Stay still, Lily. My mom is on her way here to check on you.”

“Your mom?”

He tried to smile. “My mom is a nurse. An RN. She’s coming up to check on you because you fainted.”

I tried again to sit up. “I’m fine, Tom. Let me up.”

My stubbornness seemed to amuse him, and his eyes sparkled a tiny bit. “Nice to see you still have your fire, Lily. But no. You aren’t getting up. You are going to stay right there until she checks you out, and I will sit on you if I have to.”

Ten minutes later, an older woman whom I assumed was Tom’s mom bustled into the room, a little boy holding her hand. “Lily, I’m Gladys. Sorry, this is the first time we’ve met. Now,” she glanced at her son. “You did good, Tom. Now take Jake and go do something while I check Lily.”

Tom squeezed my hand. “I better do what she says.”

That made me smile. “You better.”

After Tom and Jake had left the room, Gladys helped me sit up, a steady hand on my back. Then she asked me at least a million questions, checked my eyes and how they responded to light, and finally declared that I didn’t have a concussion. She helped me to my feet and guided me over to the window seat. She sat and looked at me, her face serious. “So, what made you faint? Did you eat today?”

“I did.”

“Any issues with blood pressure?”

“No.”

“Any chance you’re pregnant?”

I chuckled. “Not a chance.”

“That was rather definitive.” She patted my hand. “When was your last physical?”

The look on my face must have given her the answer. “Then, kiddo, you need to get a physical. There is a great woman doctor in town. She’s normal, swears like a sailor, great sense of humor, and is brilliant. Get checked out, okay?”

Since I’d never fainted before, it probably was a good idea to make sure I was okay. After all, I had been shocked before and never fainted. “I will. I promise.”

“Good.”

Walking downstairs, we found Tom and his crew stripping the wallpaper in what had been the formal parlor. The little boy was helping them, carrying the pieces over to the debris pile. When I came through the door, he looked up at me with joy. “Daddy, she’s okay. Look, she’s with Grandma.”

Tom ruffled the little boy’s curly blond hair and smiled. “She is, buddy. Jake, come on over, please.”

Leading the boy by the hand, Tom brought him over to me. “Lily, this is my son, Jacob, or Jake. Jake, this is Ms. Brannan.”

The boy held out his hand to shake mine, and I was smitten. Bright blue eyes, blond curls, a sprinkling of freckles on his nose. “Hi Jake.” I shook his hand seriously. “If it’s okay with your daddy, you can call me Lily.”

He gazed up at Tom quizzically, and Tom nodded. Jake’s smile was immediate. “Hi, Lily.”

Tom turned to his mother. “She’s okay?”

I glared. “She is right here, you know.”

He ignored me. “Mom?”

Gladys laughed. “Lily is fine. She’s going to make an appointment for a physical, but that’s it. She’s good to go, though, today.”

Just then, I heard knocking on the front door. Who the hell could that be? Other than Berto, everyone I knew in the local area was already in the room with me. “Excuse me, I’ll go see who’s at the door.”

Berto was standing at the front door, and he didn’t look happy. I opened the door. “Berto! What are you doing here? I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I gather that, Lily.” He threw a glance over his shoulder. “Looks like you have quite a group here already.”

I didn't like his tone, although I couldn't identify why. "Berto, that is the work crew. And Tom's mom is here too."

"Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why is his mother here?"

I sighed. I really would have preferred to not have shared the fainting with him. I felt stupid and weak for having fainted. "Because I fainted a while ago, and she's a nurse, so Tom had her come up to check on me."

"You fainted, and you didn't let me know?" Now his tone was full-out accusatory.

I snapped. "Berto! It just happened. I'm fine. Now, tell me, what's up? Why did you come up?"

"Because I've been trying to reach you since mid-morning, that's why. When I didn't hear from you, I got worried, so I came out." He gestured with his hand. "I don't like you living so far out of town up here, all alone. You should put the house on the market and move to civilization."

I ignored the last part of his comments. "Berto, thank you for worrying about me. I must have left the phone ringer off this morning, because I didn't hear it. I was in the zone writing, and when that happens, if the sound is off, I miss it completely." I stretched up to kiss his cheek.

"Thank you, and I'm so sorry for worrying you."

He stroked my cheek, his hand warm against my skin. "Okay, my *bella*, I'm sorry for sounding so cross with you."

"It's okay." I took his hand. "Want to come in and see the progress?"

He shook his head. "I would love to, my darling, but I need to get back for my next class." He checked his watch. "I need to hurry. Dinner tonight?"

I shook my head. "Thank you for the invitation, Berto, but I think I'm just going to have an early night tonight, get some extra sleep after the excitement of today."

He pursed his lips, clearly irritated again at being turned down, but his tone was back to normal.

"I understand. Tomorrow then?"

"I'll give you a call in the morning and let you know."

"Good. Sleep well, and please, my love, please think about what I said. Put this place on the market and move to town. Please." His eyes were warm. "All I want is to know that you are safe."

"Thank you, Berto." There was no way in hell I was giving up this house, especially after finding that window, but I wasn't going to tell him that. "I will call you in the morning."

Chapter Two

I watched his car drive slowly down the hill. Something was off, but I couldn't figure out what it was. He'd come all this way to check on me, which was really sweet, but then he'd turned around and left as soon as he'd arrived. If he was so worried, why hadn't he cancelled his class, or at least had his assistant get ready to step in to teach? He couldn't have stayed for ten more minutes?

And why was he always so hot on the idea that I sell the house? Shit, since we weren't even sleeping together, what did it matter to him where I lived? Was it as simple as that he was really worried about my safety up here? Why was our relationship basically relegated to dinners out, some walks, and phone calls? He said he was attracted to me, but seriously, he showed as much physical reaction to me as I would to paint samples. Shit! No, I like looking at paint samples, and I get super jazzed picking colors for my house. He called me darling, his *bella*, his love, but other than a few kisses, nothing was moving along.

Was I turning him off in some way? He was fucking gorgeous, so elegant and refined, but after this amount of time, I thought we'd at least be to some sessions of passion at one of our houses. Why didn't he want me to go to his place, or really come to mine?

I shook my head, then felt stupid as I realized I had just said all of that out loud. I really needed to remember that I wasn't alone all of the time anymore, so I should probably work on keeping the running dialogue in my head to myself.

I heard a noise and turned to see Tom standing in the door. "You just heard all of that, didn't you?"

He nodded. "Sorry, Lily, I didn't mean to eavesdrop. You didn't come back inside, so I just wanted to make sure you were okay." He looked down at his feet, avoiding my eyes. "I have to admit you scared me when you fainted."

Somehow, when he said he was worried it made me feel all warm and squishy inside, and yet, I'd been irritated with Berto for the same thing. What the hell was wrong with me? I smiled. "Thanks, I appreciate it. And yes, I'm a fucking mess, and anything you heard me muttering, well, please pretend you didn't hear it."

"Deal."

The rest of the afternoon was uneventful. Jake had finally left with Gladys, after giving me at least five hugs. Those little kid hugs were awesome. I felt like the queen of the world when he told me that he was going to come back to visit me soon, and that he was going to color a picture for my office.

I was back in my office working as I heard several of the trucks pull out at the end of the day. I had heard good-byes from three of the crew, but not Tom. I heard a knock on the open door and turned around to see Tom standing there. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

Clearly something was on his mind. “What’s up?”

Tom hesitated. “Are you okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, I know that we agreed to forget that I heard you talking to yourself, but, Lily, it sounded like you’re trying to figure out a hell of a lot, and then you fainted today, and I know something about that stained glass upset you. Do you want to talk about it?”

I closed my laptop, and just gazed at him for a moment. The thing was, I like Tom. Yes, I know that I’m paying him a lot of money to fix this house for me, and that was the only reason we had met, but still, I like him. He’s smart, funny and kind. He doesn’t seem to think that I’m crazy when I get into writing mode. He was as close to a friend as anyone I had in Vermont. “Want a beer?”

He smiled. “Sure.”

I got up and walked past him into the kitchen, grabbed two beers and handed one to him. Before I could open my own, he twisted the top off his and handed it back to me. “Here. Give me that one.”

I took it. “Thanks.” Then I sat on one of the kitchen stools, waiting while he did the same. “I’m out of my element here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Shit, Tom, since my mom died, I’ve either lived in cities or at school. Then I inherited this house, which I love, but I still have no fucking idea why the bat had it, and why she left it to me. I’d never even heard of it until the day her will was read.”

Tom put up a hand. “Okay, Lily. Wait. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I put my head in my hands, suddenly very tired. “Tom, how much time do you have?”

He laughed. “Lily, I have all the time you need.”

“What about Jake?”

“Every other Friday night, he goes to his biological mom’s parents’ house for dinner and an overnight, so they keep a connection with him. So, take your time. Tell me what you want to share with me.”

“Want to stay for dinner?” I felt nervous asking. “I was going to grill a steak, and I have plenty.”

“I’d love to.”

“Then how about we get dinner stuff going, and then sit and I’ll explain it all.”

“Sounds good.”

We worked in companionable quiet, Tom making a salad while I put potatoes in to bake, then prepped the steak for the grill. I wrapped a mini baguette in foil, so it could heat while the steak cooked.

That done, the potatoes cooking, and the table set, Tom opened a bottle of red wine that I handed him. He poured two glasses, then handed one to me. “Ready to talk?”

I was. Somehow, I was really, really ready to talk. “I am. Have a seat.”

We both sat. I took a deep breath. “So, my mom had me when she was seventeen.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

“My mom...” I swallowed. God, I missed her so much, even after all these years. “My mom, her name was Kathryn, Katie. She raised me all by herself. She was amazing. She got her GED, went to community college to get her degree, and always made sure that I felt loved.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. It was just the two of us. I never knew who my dad was. She wouldn’t tell me.” I took a sip. “She was a good mom. We were poor, which I later realized was not her fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“My mom came from a lot of money. I mean a lot. But by the time she was pregnant, my grandmother was dead, and my grandfather disowned my mom. He told her she had to either get an abortion or give me up for adoption, or he would cut her off.” I smiled, suddenly proud. “She told him to fuck off and walked away from everything.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Me too. She had me in a women’s shelter in Albany, then moved here to Vermont. We lived in Rutland, then Burlington, then Whiting. She worked; she took care of us. We had a good life together.”

“Good.”

Suddenly my eyes filled with tears. “When I was eleven, my mom got sick. She had breast cancer. She fought it for two years, but she died when I was thirteen.”

He reached out and put his hand over mine, squeezed it comfortingly. “I am so sorry.”

“Me too. I still miss her every day.” I choked back the tears. “Turns out, my grandfather had just died too, the week before, leaving everything to my mom.”

“Shit.”

“Yup.” I wiped a lingering tear. “I was suddenly an orphan, and my only living relative was my great Aunt Helen, my grandfather’s sister. She had guardianship of me.”

“And?”

I laughed, but even to my own ears, it wasn’t a sound of amusement. “She hated me. I was an embarrassment. My mom died on a Saturday. Her funeral was the next Saturday, and I was sent to Ms. Porter’s School for Girls on the Monday after her funeral.”

His voice crackled with anger. “You’re kidding me?”

“I wish I was. I was shipped off to boarding school, and Helen even made it so I stayed there for the summer session. I was thirteen, and I stayed there other than a couple weeks overall until I graduated from high school. Between high school and college, I was sent to a pre-college camp, then college. She hated me.”

“Jesus.”

“After that, well, I inherited from my grandfather when I turned twenty-five. His estate had been put into a trust fund for me, Helen could only touch it to pay for my expenses. By then, I’d graduated from college, gotten married, and become a writer. Then I got divorced, and just kept going on with my life. Once a year, I saw Helen for about an hour, but that was it. Then a couple months ago, Helen died, and she left me basically everything. Not because she wanted to, or because she liked me, but because she hated most other people. She left it to me because she hated me the least.”

“Wow.”

“But this house, I had no idea about it. For years, she’d held the damn will over my head, so I knew what was coming to me. This house was a complete surprise, and I still don’t have any idea why it was left to me.”

“And no one can tell you?”

“Not so far.” I stood up, suddenly embarrassed for having shared so much. “Okay, enough for now. Let’s finish making dinner.”

Together, we finished the dinner preparations, then I set two plates out for us on the table. I picked up the bottle of wine and refilled our glasses. “Cheers.”

He nodded. “Cheers.”

As I ate, I snuck glances at Tom. What the hell was I doing with a gorgeous man in my kitchen, drinking wine, talking to him about everything?

Chapter Three

I cut off a small piece of steak, and popped it in my mouth before I chewed it fully. “Okay, so...”

He chuckled. “This is great, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He wiped his mouth with the blue and white checked napkin. “Is it okay if I ask questions?”

“Of course.”

“What happened with your marriage?”

I started to laugh. “Well, that is a hell of a story.”

“Want to tell it?”

Why not? “Sure. I met my now ex-husband, David, in college. We dated all through college, got married the day after we graduated. Not only was he my husband, but my writing partner, and business partner. We got married, and I thought it would be perfect.”

“And it clearly wasn’t.”

“My husband...” Shit, this was awkward to explain. “My husband wanted to have an open marriage.”

The shock was clear on Tom’s face. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” I took a sip. “To be specific, he wanted to have an open marriage so he could also be with my college roommate, my best friend Megan.”

“Ewww.” Tom looked embarrassed. “Sorry. That was just my gut reaction.”

I laughed. “It was mine too. So, he wanted this, she wanted this, and I didn’t.”

“And?”

“He tried to fight his feelings, we went to counseling, and we finally had to admit it wasn’t going to work between us, so we divorced.” I shook my head. “He married my roommate two days after our divorce was final, and they have a fully open marriage.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I closed my eyes, wanting to tell him the rest, but I knew I couldn’t look at him while I did. “She has three lovers outside of their marriage that I know about, and he has two. And, in the interest of being completely honest, until I came up here, I was one of them.”

I opened my eyes to look at Tom. He was silent for a few seconds, then he smiled. “Well, that had to be hard to say.”

“It was.”

“And why did it end when you came here?”

That was a great question. I hadn't thought it was officially done until this conversation. Somehow, in talking about all of this today, I had realized that part of my life was over. “I don't really know. David is still my writing partner; Megan is still my best friend. But, coming back to Vermont, I have come to realize that I need to simplify my life. It worked for a while, but not anymore.”

“Okay.” He reached out to touch my hand, as if he was comforting me. “I'm not judging, Lily. Really, I'm not. Yes, I did judge your husband for wanting an open marriage, but your part after? That was between the two of you.”

“Thanks.”

“So, that's your divorce and writing career. What about coming here and meeting Roberto?”

“When I got here, I met Berto at the pizza place. We started going out. But as you probably heard me muttering about on the porch, it seems to be stalled, and I don't know why.”

“What do you mean?”

I picked up the bottle of wine and realized it was empty. “Want more?”

“Sure.”

I grabbed another bottle and handed it to him with the corkscrew. “Will you open it?”

“Of course.” He did it quickly and refilled the glasses. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” I turned the glass around in my hands, admiring the deep color of the wine. “I guess before Berto, I was pretty secure in my looks. Yes, my husband wanted to sleep with other women, but he also still wanted me. I thought I was attractive. But with Berto, he is keeping the physicality to an absolute minimum. All of our dates have been in public, he barely kisses me, and when I've invited him over, he turns me down.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He keeps telling me that he cares too much for me to rush things. I don't think I'm rushing to think that after basically two months of dating, we would have progressed beyond light kissing.”

He was silent, which suddenly irritated me. “What? No response there?”

Tom held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Look, Lily, I have strong opinions about him. I'm letting you tell me your story, and I'm doing my best to keep my stronger opinions that might upset you to myself.”

“What do you mean, you have strong opinions about him?”

“Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“No, Tom, please. Tell me what your think of him.”

Tom took a deep breath. “Look, when he moved here, I did some work for him. He was seriously the biggest pain in the ass I’ve ever encountered. He was nasty, didn’t pay his bills on time, his checks bounced, and he was condescending.”

Somehow, this didn’t surprise me. I could see Berto being difficult to tradesmen. “Oh.”

“And he dated a woman I went to high school with, and I can tell you, he didn’t have the same reservations about getting physical with her.”

Well, that made me feel just awesome. As soon as he finished the statement, Tom saw the look on my face. “Oh, Lily. Shit. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I am so sorry.”

I sighed. “Well, it did, but I know you didn’t mean to, so it’s okay. It just puts into perspective what I was trying to figure out on the porch today. I knew something was off, so I guess I should thank you for just plain saying it.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I need to figure out if I care enough to confront him about it or not. If not, I need to step away from him. If I do, then I need to sit down and have a brutally honest conversation with him.”

“Okay.”

I stood up. “Let’s clean up.”

He smiled. “You mean before you tell me why the window upset you so much?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

Chapter Four

I washed and Tom dried the dishes, asking where to put them away as he did. When the kitchen was sparkling again, I turned so I could lean against the counter. “So, before we talk about the window, tell me your story.”

“Sure.”

We sat back down at the counter. He shrugged. “What do you want to know?”

“How did your dad die?”

“Heart attack. He was a lawyer in town, and in hindsight, didn’t take great care of himself.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too. So, Mom raised us on her own. She worked as a school nurse, then also worked extra shifts at the hospital as an ER nurse. It wasn’t easy, but she kept us all together, and like your mom, we always knew we were loved.”

“That’s clear when you meet her.”

“It is.”

“And no marriages?”

“No.” A flash of pain crossed his face. “I was engaged at the time my brother died. She left when I said I was going to adopt Jake.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. But now I can say that at least I’m glad it happened before we got married. It made it simpler.”

“And you always wanted to be a contractor?”

“No.” He took a sip of his wine. “I went to college to be an architect.”

“Really?”

“What, someone who bangs nails can’t be educated?”

Shit! I’d clearly hit a nerve. “I didn’t mean it that way. I’m sorry.”

“Me too. That’s a hot button for me.”

“So, tell me about the architect thing.”

“I trained as an architect, and actually, I’m still licensed as one. But I liked building things more than planning them, so I went to construction and design. With Jake, I focused on more local projects, so I am always available for him.”

“That’s really cool. Do you ever miss bigger projects?”

“No. Too many people get involved, and I can’t control the quality as well as I can on a smaller project.”

“Like this one.”

“Exactly.”

It was time to tell him. “I need to show you something.”

“Okay.”

“Do you remember what that stained glass window looked like?”

He looked at me like I’d lost my mind, which maybe I had. “Of course.”

I was dressed in my normal writing uniform. Leggings, a fitted tank top, topped by a loose sweater. I stood up, and turned my back to Tom, dropping the sweater off my right shoulder, knowing he could see the tattoo etched into my skin there.

I heard his intake of breath. “Holy fuck.”

The stool creaked as he pushed it back to stand up. His finger was gentle as he traced the black lines that I knew so well. “How...?”

“I don’t know.” My shoulders dropped, and I felt unexpected tears swelling up. “I don’t know, Tom. I really have no clue how this happened.”

My voice must have told him how distressed I was, because before I fully knew what was happening, he was adjusting my sweater back up over my shoulder, turning me around, and pulling me into his arms. His touch was gentle and comforting as he hugged me close. “It’s okay, Lily. We’ll figure it out.”

I started to cry. Here I was, in the middle of nowhere in Vermont, living in a house that had been given to me for God-only-knows-what reason, in a relationship with a truly odd man, attracted to the man holding me, and my body was permanently marked with a unique tattoo that somehow exactly matched that window upstairs. His tone was soothing. “Shh, Lily. Don’t cry, sweetie. It’s okay.”

Finally, I knew I had to step out of his arms. Being that close to him was bringing my already overeager hormones raging to the surface, and if I didn’t move away from him, I was going to do something really stupid. He’d given me no hint that he found me attractive, so I needed to stuff down anything I was wanting right now. “Let’s go look at the window again, please.”

We walked upstairs holding hands, almost like I remembered doing when I was little and would go for a walk with my mom. In my future bedroom, the window was still leaning against the wall. The shock was still there, but not as strong now as the confusion and desire to understand were growing. “I don’t get it. Why is it here and why was it hidden?”

He knelt down to look at it, and I did the same. “I don’t know. It had been placed very carefully in that wall. It looked like someone had slid it in there to protect it, and the only way I could see where it could have happened was that there was one piece of trim on the window that doesn’t match the others. I think whoever put it here took the trim off, slid it in the wall, and replaced the trim.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know.” He reached out to put a hand over my shoulder where my tattoo was now hidden. I could feel the warmth of his hand through my sweater, and it was comforting. “How’d you decide on the design for the tattoo?”

It was going to sound crazy; I knew that. “I had a dream about it. Several actually. They started when I was about seventeen, and I kept having them. I could see the design so clearly, and finally I drew it out from memory and when I turned eighteen, I got the tattoo.”

“Could you have seen it before? The window, I mean.”

“I don’t think so, but maybe. I don’t remember seeing it, that’s for sure.”

He stood back up and pulled me to my feet. “Then we have a mystery on our hands.”

That sounded funny to me, and it made me giggle. “Maybe I’ll have to write a book about it. I’ve never written a mystery before.”

“Sounds like it’s a good time to start.”

Chapter Five

We walked back downstairs. At the bottom, Tom looked at me. “Okay, I should head out.”

“Really?”

He smiled. “Really.”

“You don’t have to go.”

His eyes were dark and warm as he looked down at me, then reached out to stroke my cheek with the back of his hand. The touch shot a bolt of electricity through me. This was not the platonic touches of earlier. I closed my eyes for a split second, chastising myself. I was making things up. He’d touched me several times today, and none of them had been sexual, and I was just imagining things now.

Opening my eyes, I saw a small smile on his lips. “No, you’re not wrong.”

“What?”

“I just felt that too.” He moved his hand slowly on my face, and I took in a sharp breath. Damn, that was so hot! “And it’s time for me to go.”

“Why?”

His posture changed, and his other hand came up so he was cradling my face in his hands. “Let me be clear, Lily, we both just felt that. That was the desire that at least I’ve been trying to ignore since the first moment I saw you. But, I don’t share well. Never did, if you listen to my mother. And there seem to be two other men in your life who seem to have dibs before me.”

“But...”

“But, nothing. If you were mine, I’d never be looking for anyone else in my bed, like your ex. And as for Berto? He’s a fucking idiot if he loses you. You are offering yourself to the man, and he seems to be putting up roadblocks.”

“This isn’t about either of them, it’s about you and me.”

“No, Lily. It can’t be about you and me until they aren’t involved in that way.” His thumb gently stroked my bottom lip, and I could feel my knees go weak. “I’ll say it again. I don’t share.”

I stood there, unsure of what to do or say next. “Please.”

“There is no need for please, Lily.” His blue eyes blazed as he looked at me, the warmth in them softening the impact of his next words. “Get them out of your life that way, and I’ll be here in a second.” With that, he leaned down and kissed me.

The second his lips touched mine, I swear I felt the floor fall away under my feet. It was like no other kiss in my life. I felt my heart grow, like the stupid Grinch, and my body immediately engulfed in heat, ready for him like I'd never been before ever.

He pulled back. "That is our last kiss unless it's just us."

He opened the door. "Good night, Lily. Thanks for dinner and I'll see you on Monday."

Two hours later, after trying hard to focus on a movie after failing miserably at writing for a while, I slid under the covers on my pullout couch. What a mind-fuck of a day! The window, Berto's odd behavior, and then Tom.

I laid in bed, contemplating my life. What did I want? Who did I want?

Berto was so charming and handsome, and urbane. We could talk about cities of the world and opera. I loved his European mannerisms. He seemed fascinated by my writing career and seemed like he had no issue with me needing time on my own to write. That was a plus.

But he hated this house, and every second I was here, I was more and more in love with the place. Could he get over that?

Then there was David. Well, not really. David would always be my writing partner, that was certain. But did I want him in my bed anymore? He was great in bed, always had been, but was it time to step away from that completely, and tell him it was done? And could I really keep that promise if I made it?

And then there was Tom. How the hell had we gone from him being just my contractor to kissing like that? Let's face it, if I was being honest, I'd thought he was attractive right from the start too. Seeing him step from his truck on that first day, I had thought he was gorgeous. That black hair, those blue eyes, and muscles that would make any woman swoon. But it had seemed like he wasn't interested. Now what the hell did I do?

Berto was moving too slowly. Tom wasn't moving at all. Berto came with a life of refinement. Tom came with a kid.

I snorted as I realized I was talking to myself again. With a growl, I rolled over and pulled the covers up to my ears and told myself to go to sleep.

Yeah, right. I wasn't going to get a lot of sleep tonight, that was for sure.

Chapter Six

The next morning, I climbed out of bed as soon as the sun peaked through my windows. I'd slept fitfully, dreams of the window interspersed with snippets of memories with David and Berto, and fantasies of Tom.

I was in a nasty mood. As I stood up, I stepped on the pen I'd been using editing the night before, which hurt like hell, and elicited an epic rant of profanity.

Limping, I walked into the kitchen and turned on the coffee maker. Thankfully, I'd remembered to set it the night before, so it was all ready. If I'd had to do that first thing, that would have pushed me right off the cliff.

I kept a stash of mini microwavable donuts in the freezer, and that was what I wanted for breakfast. I pulled them out, popped them into the microwave, and got the iPad so I could check the forecast and the news.

Just then, my phone lit up with a text from Berto. *Bella, how about joining me for breakfast at the diner this morning?*

That was just what I needed! I rolled my eyes, then typed, *Thanks for the invitation, but I got up early to write and I've already eaten.*

It was several minutes before he responded. *Are you angry with me?*

Why? Should I be? As soon as I hit 'send' I regretted that message. After all, my confusion wasn't his fault.

Is there something going on? Have I done something to upset you?

It was time to stop texting like I was a teenager. I dialed his number and waited for him to answer.

"Lily. Good morning."

"Hi, Berto."

"Are you okay, *bella*? You seem upset with me." His tone was forlorn.

"Oh, Berto. I'm not upset. I just don't understand where we are in terms of ... us?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you say you care about me, you seem to, but we only go out in public. Our physical relationship is non-existent. You hate my house. You tell me you don't want me to live here. I don't get it." I paused. "Then there was yesterday. You came up here, saying you were so worried, but you didn't even stay for five minutes. I don't get it."

“*Bella*, listen to me. I am absolutely crazy about you. Probably too crazy about you. You are all I can think of, and I don’t want to waste my love for you on a fling.”

Love. Love? Did he just say his love for me? Holy fuck. That was a whole different ballgame, and I didn’t know how I felt about it.

He was still talking. “And darling, you are too special to me to just jump into bed together. I’ve done that before in relationships. I don’t want to do that with you.”

“Oh.”

His voice lowered, and it was like a caress in my ear. “Lily, I am in love with you. You are my life. I am sorry if I haven’t expressed that to you in the right way. If I have not shown you how I feel, not made you secure in that love, that is on me. I have failed. Please, please let me show you how much I care.”

Wow. Whoa. Wait a minute. My lack of sleep, swirling emotions and Berto’s confession were making my head spin. “Berto. Wow. This is a lot to take in, please, understand that I’m overwhelmed.”

His voice changed to one of slight irritation. “How can hearing that the man you are with loves you be something that overwhelms you? Don’t you love me?”

The question took me by surprise, although maybe it shouldn’t have. Most people automatically respond to the words, “I love you,” with “I love you, too.”

Did I love Berto? It hit me. I didn’t know him well enough to know if I loved him or not. Our relationship had been so short and limited in scope, that, well, I couldn’t say that I loved him, but I also couldn’t say that I didn’t love him.

I sighed, but before I could say a word, he cut me off. “The fact that you haven’t answered me tells me that either you don’t love me, and don’t want to hurt me, or that you have doubts in some way that my feelings are true.”

“Berto, I’m just stunned. Yesterday, that visit bothered me. I was doubting what I meant to you, and frankly, I was beginning to think we shouldn’t be together. With this conversation, I need to think. I need to absorb what you’ve said and see how I feel.”

He was silent, so I continued. “Please, Berto, if you really love me, I need time. Please give me the time to think about this, about us.”

I waited for him to speak, and finally, I heard him clear his throat. “Lily, of course. I hoped you felt as strongly as I do, but I understand that if I hadn’t made my feelings clear to you, this might all surprise you.”

“Thank you.”

“Could we have dinner here together tomorrow night? To talk?”

At his place? Wow. That was a big step. Then I remembered my schedule. “Berto, I have a video call tomorrow night that is likely to take several hours. Remember? I told you about it. It’s with the editor and graphic designer.”

“Of course. I remember. Then would Monday work?” His voice grew silky. “It seems like forever from now, but for you, I will do anything.”

“Monday it is. I’ll see you then.”

“I love you, my darling.”

Well, that was unexpected. I hung up the phone and gazed at the dark screen in shock. What the hell had just happened? How did I go from thinking this guy really wasn’t that into me to him professing his love? And how did I know if I loved him back?

There was only one way to figure this out. It was time to call the two people on earth who knew me better than anyone else and talk to them. I picked up my phone and called David and Megan.

Chapter Seven

David answered on the third ring, and from his voice, I knew I'd awakened at least him. "Hey, it's me. Sorry for waking you up, but I need you guys."

He growled. "Hold on. Meg, wake up. Lily needs us." He paused. "Putting you on speakerphone."

Megan had always awakened immediately and fully. "You okay?"

"Yeah, but I need the two of you to help me think something through."

Instantly, Meg morphed into her professional lawyer role. "Go."

"So, I'm in Vermont. I met this guy, Roberto Romano, Berto. Hot Italian, very Euro, smart, sexy, kind of over the top in terms of manner and dress, but amazing."

"Okay." I wasn't sure who said it as I was so engrossed in my story.

"The thing is, we've been seeing each other for a couple months, and we haven't progressed past light kissing, we don't go to each other's houses, we just date out in public. He hates my house. He hates that I don't live in town, and he is fussy."

"And?" That was David.

"And so yesterday, I fainted. He arrived just after because he was worried because I didn't answer my phone, but he only stayed for a couple minutes."

"Are you okay?" Megan asked.

"Yes, I'm fine." I took a breath. "Long story short, he was kind of a jerk. Then my contractor, Tom, stayed for dinner and I told him about my life, about all of us, and talked about my tattoo."

"What about your tattoo?" David sounded awake. "Why is that even part of the story?"

That's an editor for you. I'm telling him a personal story, and he wants to cut out useless dialogue. "David! Shut up and listen. Yesterday, the crew found a stained glass window hidden in a wall, and it has the exact same design as my tattoo."

"Fuck!" David sounded rattled. "Shit, Lily, you had dreams for months about that design. What the hell is that all about?"

I yelled, "I don't know! So, I told Tom everything, and well, then we kissed, and it was amazing. But the thing is, he told me that absolutely nothing, I mean nothing, will happen between us until I'm done with Berto, and I end the sex thing with you, David."

"Wow. Okay. Continue." David sniffed, a sign that he was getting angry or possessive or both.

"We'll talk about that later."

“So, I spent the night trying to sort all of this out, and then I just talked to Berto, and he told me he loves me, and wants to be with me, like, seriously.”

Megan chuckled. “Well, that sure is an interesting start to the day?”

“So, what do I do?” I wailed.

There was silence. Then David cleared his throat. “Lily, since you didn’t say you told him you loved him too, I assume you didn’t.”

“Correct.”

“Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Do you love him?”

“I have no frigging clue. I don’t think I know him enough to know that. I mean, I don’t know if he steals the covers. I don’t know if he leaves his socks on the bathroom floor. I don’t know if he puts the jelly knife into the peanut butter jar. How can I know if I love him if I don’t know those things about him?”

Megan chuckled. “It’s amazing that David does all of those things, but they didn’t bother you at first.”

“I know.” I felt defeated. “What do I do?”

David’s voice was gentle. “Lily, if you don’t know enough about him to know if you love him, then you have two choices. One choice is to get to know him better. Be upfront with him and learn about him. The second is that if you were kissing Tom last night, you could choose to walk away from Berto and see what happens with Tom.”

Megan interrupted. “Third choice, put them both on hold and take some time for yourself, and see which one you miss more or think about more.”

That sounded like a good idea. Then it hit me. “I can’t really do that, at least with Tom. He’s renovating the house I’m living in right now. We see each other constantly.”

David yawned. “It’s too early to be thinking this hard, Lil. If you can’t avoid him there, then take a break for at least a couple of days. Come down here and stay with us. Go to Montreal. Go stay in that cottage you were first in, or something like that.”

Montreal? That was an idea I hadn’t thought of, and that sounded really good. “I could go to Old Montreal, stay in a hotel, sleep late, order room service, and think.”

Megan laughed. “And shop, get a pedicure, shit like that. Hell, Lily, it would do you a world of good.”

It would, that was for sure. “That’s what I’m going to do.”

Chapter Eight

After hanging up, I opened my laptop. Ten minutes later, I had a reservation for a lovely hotel I'd stayed in before in Old Montreal. I was going on a trip. Just me, no reason other than to think, and it was going to be glorious.

I would leave this afternoon, drive straight there, and be in my hotel by dinner. I could do my call with my publisher from Montreal, and then take a couple days completely off from the world.

Packing was simple. I wasn't trying to impress anyone, just be by myself. But Megan was right, maybe I'd do some shopping while I was there.

I took my shower, dressing for driving such a distance, then went back down to my office. I packed my laptop and tablet, chargers and the other necessities to keep writing away from the office.

I was ready to go.

Shit, there was one more thing--well, actually two--that I needed to do before leaving. I had to tell Tom and Berto. Call? Text? Email? What was the right manner of communication to say, "I need to get the hell away from you both to get my head on straight"?

Texting was the easiest. Berto was first. *Hi, after our talk this morning, I realized that I need some time away from here, to be alone and think. I'm going away for a few days, until at least Wednesday, then I will be back. I will call you as soon as I get back, but I am shutting off my phone for a few days.*

Just then, my phone pinged. It was a text from Tom. *Hi, Lily. I just wanted to apologize for how I acted last night, and to say that I'm going to take a few days off from your project. The guys will be there, but I think I need to step away for a bit. Text me if you need something.*

Interesting... I texted back. *Hi, made me smile because I was just texting you to say that I was going away for a few days to get my head on straight. I should be back on Thursday or so. I will let you know when I get back.*

Ding. A text from Berto had arrived. *Darling, please don't go away, let's think this out together. I love you enough for both of us. Stay, and let me show you how much.*

Ding. Tom. *Safe travels and clear thinking.*

Did I need to respond to Berto? I had told him my phone was being shut off. Fuck. I slowly typed. *Thanks for your belief in me and in us, but I do need to take this time. See you later in the week.*

Then I did actually turn off notifications on my phone. I was going to take care of myself, and I was going to take a break. Period.

The drive was uneventful with the exception of an exceedingly long line of traffic at the border crossing. I'd only crossed into Canada once before in a car, and that had been at the big crossing north of Burlington. This was a tiny crossing, and it took forever.

Once through the border, it was smooth sailing, and I was in Montreal more than an hour earlier than I had expected. Handing my keys over to the valet, I was escorted to my luxury suite in what seemed like only minutes.

The connected rooms were gorgeous. Old brick walls, windows looking out at the city, and a chilled bottle of white wine waiting for me. I picked up the card with interest. Only David and Megan, and my agent knew where I was. The note was short: *Sleep, drink, eat, go to the spa, and the answer will come to you. We love you - D and M.*

With that, I opened the wine and poured myself a glass. This was exactly what I needed! I reached for the room phone and called the front desk. "Hello, this is room 519. I need a room service menu, then I would also like the information about booking daily appointments with the hotel spa."

On Thursday morning, I handed the valet a hefty tip as he gave me back my keys. I'd slept late every day, eaten my favorite foods, gotten my hair cut, had a manicure, pedicure and massage, and had a huge box of pastries in the backseat. And, yes, I had spent way too many hours weighing how I felt about Berto, and what I wanted to do there, and if Tom factored into any of this. I had reached my decision. I was ready to head home.

The trip home was a breeze until I hit the border. Then, just like on the trip north, I had to sit and wait. With a sigh, I reached for my phone and turned the notifications back on.

It was like a tidal wave hit my phone. Berto had texted me at least five times each day, all with declarations of love and devotion. At first, I felt a swell of sweet emotion, then, I have to admit, I felt irritation. Stop being so needy!

Then, yesterday and today, there were several from Tom. Those weren't declarations of love, they were pronouncements of having to talk to me about the house, and the urgency of calling back.

The last one was pretty decisive. It was short: *Lily, I need you to call me NOW. We need to tell you what is going on here. I don't know how long I can keep this under wraps.*

Chapter Nine

What the hell did that message mean? I waited to cross the border, then hit speed dial for Tom's number. Berto could wait. Five rings, then the voicemail kicked in. "Hi, it's Tom. Leave a message and I'll get back to you."

I grimaced. "Tom, it's Lily. I just got your messages. I just crossed the border, heading home. Call me, please."

I drove faster than I should. What was going on at my house? I felt both fear and anticipation. Why the heck had this house been left to me? What the holy hell was the secret behind this whole thing?

Finally, the familiar landmarks started coming into view. I was almost home. What was I going to find?

Just then, my phone rang. It was Berto. I hit the button to answer the call. "Hi."

"Hello, darling. Where are you?"

"I am about a half-hour from home, Berto. Almost there. I will probably lose signal any moment now, but I will call you when I get home and settled."

"Oh, Lily, that sounds so good. I have missed you so much. My love, I will see you this evening, yes?"

This was my decision. Berto was my boyfriend, and I wanted to see what was going to happen with him. "Yes, please, Berto. Would you come to my house for dinner tonight?"

"Love, I will go anywhere to see you. Does seven work? Would you like me to cook for you?"

"I'm happy to cook. Seven works."

As I pulled into my driveway, I could see all of Tom's crew's vehicles there, as well as his truck. Everyone was here. Why?

Suddenly, my heart jumped. Berto's car was here too. What the hell was going on?

I jumped out of the car, leaving everything behind. I could unpack later. I jogged up the front steps, pushed open the door, shouting, "Tom. What's going on? I've been trying to call you."

Tom stepped out of what would be my room, standing at the top of the stairs. His face was serious. "Lily, we need you to come up here."

I lifted my foot to start climbing the stairs. Berto popped his head out of my office. "Lily! Darling. Please, sweetheart, I have a surprise for you."

Berto, my future, or Tom, my contractor? What the hell was I supposed to do first?

I paused, unsure. Tom sounded so serious. Berto was waiting for me. I made my decision. “Tom, I’ll be up in a couple minutes.”

I saw his face tighten, but he nodded. “I understand.”

Shit. Now he was mad, and I still didn’t know what the big deal was that he’d been calling me about. I tried to smile. “Berto, so good to see you.”

He held out his hand and I took it. With a sexy smile, he pulled me into my office, which had been turned into a romantic dream room. Roses. Candles. Soft curtains. Champagne in an ice bucket, two gorgeous flutes waiting to be filled. “Berto, this is amazing!”

“Nothing is too good for you, my love.” He kissed me lingeringly, the longest and most passionate kiss we’d ever shared. “I love you, and I’ve missed you.”

I touched his face. “I missed you too.”

He dropped to his knees. “Darling, marry me. Let me love you for the rest of your life. Please.”

Shock filled me, and just behind it came a tidal wave of undeniable nausea. Feeling it, I wrenched away from his hands, turning to see Tom standing in the doorway, his face white with shock or anger, as I violently vomited my breakfast all over the antique rug.



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Kris' novel *Tomorrow and Yesterday* is available on Amazon and other online retailers, as is her memoir *Of Grief, Garlic, and Gratitude*.

Late 2021 or early 2022, Kris will release her newest novel, *Competing with the Dead Man* with Between the Lines Publishing. Three other novels, *That One Small Omission*, *More Than I Can Say*, and *That Missed Call* will also be re-released by Between the Lines Publishing in the winter of 21/22.